



The Ties that Bind

A story about fighting your way to independence

THE FIGHTER: Directed by David O. Russell. Written by Scott Silver, Paul Tamasy and Eric Johnson. Cinematography, Hoyte van Hoytema. Music, Michael Brook. Starring Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Melissa Leo. Paramount Pictures, 2010. R. 114 minutes. ★★★★★

Extending Boston's banquet at the cineplex this year, *The Fighter*, which takes place in the Boston suburb of Lowell, joins *The Town*, *Knight and Day* and *Shutter Island* at the table. Of these films, only *The Fighter* transcends its setting. What may seem like a double dip into genre — Boston and boxing — is actually a piece of bravura filmmaking, a regional film only in the sense that local history and custom add flavor to the core themes of the film. Western Massachusetts, with its swagger and sway, its twin loves of sports and booze, suffuses but doesn't swallow *The Fighter*, a film of such ambition and craft that it achieves a kind of timeless quality by its final act. Rare is the drama that manages to be about sports without falling to its knees in sports cliché. Instead, *The Fighter* focuses on the toil that amateur sports takes on family, friendships and the athlete himself.

The film's structure is a work of art. Closely based upon a true story, *The Fighter* uses a film-within-a-film to tell the story of a middling welterweight boxer, Micky Ward (Mark Wahlberg), and his brother and trainer, Dicky Ecklund (Christian Bale), a former boxing champ. As the film opens, a documentary crew is trailing Dicky, who claims to be mounting a comeback. But Dicky, who rarely changes clothes, whose eye sockets are cavities of sleeplessness and suffering, doesn't strike you as the most reliable type. When Dicky re-enacts his most famous fight, a 1978 bout with Sugar Ray Leonard, while squatting in a crack house, director David O. Russell (*Three Kings*, *I ♥ Huckabees*) cuts in actual footage of the fight, so we

can feel how low Dicky has fallen. And that documentary? It's called *High on Crack Street: Lost Lives in Lowell*.

With Dicky increasingly unreliable, Alice Ecklund (Melissa Leo), the mother to both brothers — in addition to seven charmless daughters — is exposed as the controlling matriarch, a woman whom Charlene (Amy Adams), Micky's girlfriend, sees clearly as a drag on Micky. Micky just wants a title shot before he's too old to try, but his family sees him as a stepping stone, a good boxer rather than a great one. He's their payday, the family cash cow, and they don't mind putting Micky in harm's way if it means even a modest paycheck.

For an idea of the chaos Micky faces, look no further than his boxing corner, where his co-trainers are Dicky, a drug addict, and a local Lowell cop. At the calm center of everything sits Micky, played by Wahlberg as a young man of gentle defiance — a Dirk Diggler with a few more losses under his belt. While Wahlberg cements his reliable standing with a solid and thorough performance, one for which he trained and studied for four years, his fellow actors each give career-defining performances. If you aspire to act, *The Fighter* is an acting clinic. Watch Adams' face as Wahlberg wallops a bar patron to protect her honor; watch Wahlberg's expression when he gets her phone number. Observe Melissa Leo's face as she realizes what Dicky really is — or Dicky's face as he sings to her so that she might slide back into denial. The entire entourage as they enter Bally's casino in Atlantic City is a piece of perfect Scorsese-esque stagecraft, and one of the reasons we'll be watching this film on Sunday afternoons 20 years from now. A film about learning to look out for yourself when those who should be looking out for you can't, *The Fighter* is easily among the best films of this year or any other. **EW**

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